

**WISCONSIN DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC INSTRUCTION**

# **Wisconsin READS Initiative**

***Final Evaluation Report Executive Summary***

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*Prepared by*



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## ***Final Evaluation Report Executive Summary***

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## **Executive Summary**

The Reading Evaluation and Demonstration of Success (READS) Initiative grant program was initiated by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (WDPI) in fiscal year (FY) 2000 and has operated over the past four school years through FY 2003. Its goal has been to positively affect student reading achievement and reduce the special education referral rate in READS-funded schools through the implementation of comprehensive reading programs. Comprehensive programs were defined as those that are provided for all children in a school and integrated into the entire school curriculum.

The WDPI contracted with the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory (NCREL) to conduct an independent evaluation of the READS Initiative. This final report of the evaluation presents a synthesis of findings over the four-year period of READS funding, spanning FY 2000 through FY 2003. During this four-year period, the WDPI awarded between 75 and 86 READS grants annually, supporting reading initiatives in 84 to 92 schools each year. The total READS funding level varied over time, from a first year total of \$864,078 to a peak of \$1.1 million in FY 2001.

The four-year evaluation of the READS program has focused on five questions:

1. What is the nature of the READS Initiative?
2. Has the READS Initiative reduced referral rates for special education?
3. Has the READS Initiative affected retention rates or other student behavior indicators?
4. How do reading activities improve student acquisition of reading skills and abilities?
5. What characteristics of reading programs are related to student outcome measures?

The NCREL evaluation addressed these questions using multiple methods, including (a) surveys administered to READS project directors and participating teachers; (b) site visits to a sample of schools each year, resulting in school case studies; (c) analysis of extant data contained in the Wisconsin's Information Network for Successful Schools (WINSS) database and the National Center for Education Statistics' Common Core of Data database; and (d) a longitudinal analysis of student demographic and reading achievement test data collected over the four years of the evaluation and analyzed using hierarchical linear modeling.

### **1. What is the nature of the READS Initiative?**

- The Wisconsin READS Initiative awarded 86 grants in FY 2000 (the 1999–2000 school year) for a total of \$864,078. READS funding peaked in FY 2001 at \$1,148,332 and then declined over the subsequent two years as the number of grantees continuing in the initiative fell to 75. In FY 2003, READS programs in 89 schools were supported by \$962,915, with an average grant award of \$12,879.
- The READS Initiative has been focused at the elementary school level. The majority of READS-funded schools have been midsized, with enrollments between 250 and 500

students, and located in rural areas. Funded schools have had an average of approximately 16 elementary school teachers, most of whom are general education classroom teachers.

- READS teachers tend to be veteran educators, with an average of 15 years of teaching experience. Most of the READS teachers have either a bachelor's or master's degree with some additional graduate-level training. The most common type of licensure for general education teachers is a reading teacher license. Among special educators, possessing a teaching license in the area of learning disabilities was most typical.
- Over 20,000 students were served by READS in the 2002–03 school year. The vast majority of the READS students were white (83 percent to 86 percent over the four years), and the student population was evenly divided between boys and girls. About one third of the READS students were from poor families, 4 percent to 5 percent were limited English proficient, and 12 percent to 14 percent had a disability that qualified them for special education.
- Using the READS grant to fund professional development opportunities became an increasing focus of the READS Initiative over time. By 2002–03, almost all READS projects (95 percent) spent grant funds on professional development, most often (43 percent) to build teachers' reading and writing instruction skills.
- Over eight in ten READS teachers participated in some form of professional development in 2002–03. Teacher collaboration, comprehension instruction, and phonics instruction were seen as the most useful forms of professional development to the teachers.
- The use of an externally oriented approach to professional development was seen as most effective by the teachers. This involved the use of teacher study groups based on professional organization standards, visiting and observing exemplary or innovative programs, and taking university-based graduate courses of study. An externally oriented approach to professional development was also found to be positively related to specifically helping teachers improve student writing skills.
- One in three teachers implemented a specific literacy intervention through the READS Initiative in FY2003. These interventions consisted of published reading programs such as SRA direct instruction, conceptual frameworks such as a Balanced Literacy approach, and explicit reading instruction strategies such as guided reading.
- Over time, the READS Initiative has increasingly taken on a schoolwide focus, although at no time was it ever predominantly a schoolwide initiative in most sites.
- READS projects have focused on lowering the rate of special education referral and increasing student reading achievement. Building teacher knowledge of effective reading instruction practices and supporting the application of this knowledge in classroom settings has been a primary means to these ends.

- *Keys to success included supportive environments for teacher learning*, resulting in the development of professional learning communities among the teachers. This was evident in successful schools making time for grade-level teacher meetings and providing release time for teachers to participate in professional development and school improvement activities. *Inclusion of specialized teachers* in the grade-level meetings, discussions, and professional development was another apparent key to success.

## **2. Has the READS Initiative reduced referral rates for special education?**

- Students with disabilities ranged between 12 percent and 14 percent of the READS population over the four years. The most common types of disabilities in the READS population included speech-language disorders and learning disabilities.
- Special education referral declined over time at a substantially greater rate in READS schools compared to Wisconsin statewide school averages, suggesting a higher degree of reading failure prevention associated with the READS Initiative than would otherwise normally be expected.

## **3. Has the READS Initiative affected retention rates or other student behavior indicators?**

- READS participation did not influence overall elementary school performance in terms of school attendance, retention in grade, school suspension, or school expulsion rates. On all four indicators, school performance trends for the READS elementary schools over the four years examined were no more favorable than the trends of non-READS comparison elementary schools.
- While the READS grants produced a small, positive impact on improving reading achievement for participating students, this effect may have been too weak to translate into school performance on a set of nonachievement measures.
- It may be unrealistic to expect school-level effects when READS participation is generally not a schoolwide phenomenon.
- It should also be understood that the four school indicators are relatively insensitive to change because they are already at the extremes of their respective scales. For example, the average rates of school retention, expulsion, and suspension are so low that these indicators have little potential to be decreased further. The same can be said about attendance rates from the opposite extreme: The average school attendance rate is so high that there is little room for improvement.
- Finally, it needs to be understood that limitations in sampling were not a factor in explaining the observed results. In a post-hoc analysis of the effect of sampling factors, it was found that (a) the excluded schools were mostly rural; (b) the included schools were a mix of rural, urban, and suburban schools; and (c) *none of the indicator rates were affected by urbanicity*.

#### **4. How do reading activities improve student acquisition of reading skills and abilities?**

- In excess of eight in ten teachers reported that the READS Initiative had changed reading instruction in their classrooms. Most often, these changes had to do with enhancing general education instruction for all students in the regular education classroom.
- Changing classroom reading instruction was positively influenced by (a) participation in READS-funded professional development opportunities, (b) the perceived usefulness of reading comprehension and fluency instruction training, and (c) implementing a specific literacy intervention through READS.
- READS increased instructional collaboration for most participating teachers. Increased collaboration took place among the general education teachers and between the general education teachers and the specialist teachers.
- Participation in READS-funded professional development and the implementation of specific literacy interventions through READS both contributed to the enhanced collaboration among the teachers.
- The teachers generally perceived that READS had definitely helped them become better literacy educators. Predictors of teacher impact included (a) the perceived usefulness of phonics and comprehension instruction training, (b) instructional collaboration, and (c) participation in school-based professional development. School-based professional development was the most typical approach and generally perceived as moderately effective.
- The teachers generally perceived that READS had definitely helped improve their students' reading comprehension skills. Students' phonics and writing skills had also generally improved somewhat due to READS, according to teacher self-reports.
- Improvements in the students' literacy skills in the areas of phonics, comprehension, and writing skills were related to (a) improvements in the teachers' instructional skills, (b) the perceived usefulness of READS-funded pedagogical training directly relevant to improving student literacy skills (e.g., comprehension training for improving reading comprehension), and (c) the implementation of specific literacy interventions through the READS Initiative.
- Inadequate resources—lack of time and money—were seen as somewhat of a barrier to school improvement by approximately 75 percent of the READS teachers.
- An unstable school environment—high staff turnover and student mobility—was not generally seen as a problem, but it was found to be a barrier to implementing new literacy interventions and initiatives.
- Poorly targeted professional development was generally not a problem in the READS Initiative.

## 5. What characteristics of reading programs are related to student outcome measures?

### Test Result Findings

- A longitudinal analysis was conducted using hierarchical linear modeling to evaluate the change in students' reading performance over the four years of the READS Initiative. The purpose of the analysis was to determine whether the READS Initiative produced improvements in reading performance, and whether the programs were equally effective for all student demographic groups and for different types of schools.
- The sample for the longitudinal analysis consisted of 5,727 students in 69 schools. Each student provided between two and four data points.
- The effectiveness of the READS programs was evaluated by examining the change in Normal Curve Equivalent (NCE) scores over time. On average, there was a significant positive change in NCE scores over time, suggesting that the READS Initiative does improve reading performance relative to national norms.
- *The impact of the READS Initiative on student reading performance was small; however, an average student gain of one NCE point per year was realized.* The average student reading level increased from an NCE of 56 after the first year to an NCE of 59 after the fourth year of participation in the program. Most students (71 percent) realized some gain in NCE scores.
- For the most part, the READS Initiative was effective for all demographic groups, although some differences were found. *The rate of improvement was highest for Hispanic students, in which the initial gap in reading performance was completely eliminated by the fourth year of the program.* The rate of improvement was also higher for male students relative to female students, but the difference was small.
- School characteristics accounted for 67 percent of the between-school variance in the rate of improvement. Student-teacher ratio was one school characteristic that had an effect on student reading performance. Specifically, students in schools with relatively large classrooms tended to have lower initial performance compared to students in schools with smaller classrooms. *However, participation in the READS Initiative reduced the gap between large and small classrooms. By the end of the four years of the READS Initiative, students in large classrooms had caught up to the performance level of students from small classrooms.*
- The relative concentration of students with disabilities in a school was the other school characteristic that had an effect on student reading performance. Specifically, reading performance for students with disabilities improved only if they were in a school with a relatively high proportion of special education students. This seemed to suggest that schools with large special education populations may have tended to focus resources more effectively on these students relative to schools with small populations of students with disabilities.



## Limitations of Student Performance Data Analyses

- The reliability over time of the reading test scores was low. Low reliability is particularly problematic in longitudinal designs with only two time points, which was true for the majority of students in this study. Consequently, a reliable measure of the rate of improvement could not be obtained for some students. Measures of improvement at the school level were more reliable, but their reliability was not high.
- The study included no control groups or true baseline data against which to contrast the performance of the READS students. Instead, effectiveness was inferred from a change in reading test scores relative to national norms. Assuming that NCE scores would be stable over time in the absence of a treatment effect, any change in mean NCE scores can be attributed to participation in the READS Initiative.
- The data collected for the study did not provide a direct indication of the degree to which each student had participated in the READS Initiative. Participation was inferred from the presence or absence of a student in the databases provided by each school. A direct measure of program participation would allow more accurate and sensitive assessment of program impact.
- No standard measure was available regarding how the READS Initiative was implemented within each school. Differences in specific READS programs and how they were implemented at the school level would have provided important information about the effectiveness of the initiative. Information about the relative effectiveness of different READS approaches would have provided valuable guidance on the best way to implement reading programs.

## Recommendations

***Professional Development.*** The professional development provided through the READS Initiative helped improve the teachers' instructional effectiveness, which in turn helped improve students' literacy skills. READS professional development was generally seen as at least moderately effective and should continue to be emphasized.

- Externally oriented approaches to professional development were rated as the most effective by the teachers and were also specifically related to helping the teachers improve student writing skills. External approaches include using professional organization standards to guide teacher study groups, site visits to observe innovative programs, and enrollment in university-based graduate courses of study.
- Teacher collaboration, comprehension instruction, and phonics instruction were also the most useful forms of professional development and should be promoted.
- Going beyond professional development to the actual implementation of explicit literacy interventions was also found to be positively related to teacher improvement and student reading achievement, and should be encouraged more. Examples of explicit literacy

interventions include published programs such as SRA direct instruction and Reading Recovery, conceptual frameworks such as Balanced Literacy and 4-Blocks, and instructional strategies such as guided reading and Literacy Circles.

- A key to making professional development work was to make release time available for teachers to participate in such opportunities and to support the development of professional teacher communities within the schools.
- Making time for teacher collaboration through grade-level and subject-matter planning groups was another key to successful school improvement.

***Special Education Placement.*** Special education referral indicators should be added to the WINNS database.

***Reading Achievement.*** While the READS Initiative did show that students benefited on the average in terms of growth in reading skills, the achievement effects were small. Future initiatives may benefit more from a demonstration program approach in which evidence-based programmatic designs that are clearly articulated and that are intended to lead to the implementation of specific literacy interventions are funded. The nature of the READS program or programs was never really defined, because most projects did not really appear to have an articulated program theory that schools were attempting to implement other than providing professional development opportunities to teachers. In fact, most READS projects did not implement a specific literacy intervention of any particular orientation.

***Data Collection and Data Management.*** Future statewide evaluations using longitudinal designs should require the collection of more data points per student in order to obtain sufficiently reliable data to measure student-level change. Using longitudinal designs with more data points per student would also provide much richer information on the nature of change and permit the exploration of nonlinear effects. This is critical in any developmental population where the rate of learning probably increases and decreases over time and at different periods of time.

Other methodological recommendations for future statewide evaluations in Wisconsin include the following scientifically based principles:

- Collect data on sufficiently large samples of schools and classrooms to satisfy statistical power requirements for the intended type of analysis.
- Collect data directly on the degree to which students and schools participate in a program.
- Collect standardized data directly on the degree to which the *treatment* is being implemented by a program. That is, directly measure the intervention being implemented to determine what the experimental students are receiving and how much of it they are getting.
- Collect true baseline or pretest data.
- Use control or comparison groups.

Finally, we recommend that the WDPI take a more direct role in prescribing, monitoring, and enforcing standards on the management and implementation of local databases maintained for state evaluation and reporting.